
Government of the District of Columbia



Executive Office of the Mayor

Committee on Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable Tom Davis, Chairman

***“Under Fire:
Does the District of Columbia's Gun Ban
Help or Hurt the Fight Against Crime?”***

Testimony of
Anthony A. Williams
Mayor
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Tuesday, June 28, 2005
Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building
2:30 p.m.

Chairman Davis, Congresswoman Norton, and other distinguished members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify today on the gun control laws in the District of Columbia. I am pleased that our Chief of Police, Charles Ramsey, is also here today. He will provide greater detail about how our gun control laws help prevent and combat crime. I would like to focus my remarks today on the critical importance of our gun control laws as a matter of our local democratic processes and Home Rule.

As Mayor of the District of Columbia, it is my responsibility to do what I think is best to provide for the public safety of our citizens. Any attempt at the federal level to pass a law or otherwise replace my judgment and our City Council's judgment with that of officials elected elsewhere is an indignity to the democratic process and our citizens.

This legislation is a slap in the face to me and to the people who live in this city. People who live in Texas should no more impose their values on the people of the District than people who live in the Shaw neighborhood should impose their values on the people of Houston.

I am also offended by this effort because of the hard work I've invested in returning this city to financial stability and economic good health. We ended the reign of the Control Board, and we have worked diligently hand-in-hand with Congress to foster greater autonomy for the city. A congressionally driven gun repeal takes us in the wrong direction.

The District of Columbia has been governed by an elected Mayor and thirteen elected Council members since 1975. During the Council's first legislative session in 1976, the District passed legislation that restricted the possession, use and transfer of handguns and semiautomatic weapons.

I support our gun control laws because in my view, which is also the view of most of our citizens, any increase in the number of guns in the District will increase the likelihood that crimes will be committed with those guns. We have made significant progress in reducing crime, although we still have work to do.

The residents of the District of Columbia know all too well the human costs exacted by guns and violence. Seventy nine percent of all homicides in the District last year were committed with guns, all of which were probably brought into the city illegally. Because of the porous nature of our borders, we can never rely on laws alone to keep guns out of our city, but these laws are important local tools to combat crime.

The District of Columbia is far safer than it was a decade ago. In 1995—which was not even the peak of the 90's crime wave—more than 68,000 serious crimes were committed in our city. Last year, fewer than half that number were committed. Significant long-term efforts—such as increasing the number of sworn officers to 3,800, restructuring our Police Service Areas, strengthening our investigative capacity, and improving 911 response times—have contributed to these great strides in public safety.

The police department is also taking aggressive action in the short term to reduce homicides and other crimes in the city. Though crime decreased 18 percent last year, arrests actually increased 14 percent. Project Safe Neighborhoods, in particular, is helping to stop the cycle of gun violence in the city. The Metropolitan Police Department is working with federal law

enforcement agencies and the courts to target and apprehend members of the most violent gangs in the city, and using the example of their prosecution and incarceration to deter other groups from resorting to similar violence. It is inconceivable that Congress would encourage more people in DC to pick up a gun just when we are successfully convincing others to put down their guns.

I awake every morning aware of my enormous responsibilities as Mayor to the nearly 600,000 residents of this city. I am humbled by the honor bestowed on me as custodian of the Nation's Capital. Being Mayor of Washington, DC is a wonderful job, and a difficult job. I have the duties of mayors, county managers, and governors. My city is host to the seat of the federal government, a strong international community, and more than 20 million visitors each year. The City Council and I govern this city through partnerships that span political parties, ideologies and geography.

This is especially true in the area of public safety. I have traveled to every area of my city to hear firsthand from citizens about their concerns and to enlist them in our crusade against crime. I have aligned my entire city budget to "lift all communities," starting with those that are mostly left behind in our city's renaissance. Every one of those communities is struggling with a crime problem. The city has responded with a successful Hot Spots Initiative that has produced a 32 percent reduction in violent crime and a 25 percent reduction in overall crime in these violence prone communities.

I support and participate in the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, an intergovernmental body of local, regional, and federal law enforcement officials. Members of my administration are open to every aspect of dialogue with our federal partners.

My point is that there are many ways for the federal government to work with local officials. Our public safety agenda is community-based and ought to be supported by Congress, not undermined. You have my cooperation. You have my respect. You have my ear. In turn, the citizens of Washington, DC do not need disrespect or second guessing. And nor do I.

We ask that the federal government support the efforts I've outlined to reduce crime in our city -- especially our prerogative to enact local gun control laws that provide for the public safety of the citizens of the District of Columbia.

The citizens of the District of Columbia want nothing more than other American citizens would demand and get: the right to make our own decisions about our public safety.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.